

Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany
Midway Presbyterian Church
January 28, 2018

Love Builds Up

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm today is a psalm of thanksgiving, intended for use by the worshipping community. It's an alphabetic acrostic, for each line begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet—an A to Z celebration of God's mighty works. Study and remembrance of the works and ways of God should lead to the reverence that is the beginning of wisdom. Listen to these words from Psalm 111...

Introduction to the Epistle

In our Epistle Lesson for today we find that one group within the Corinthian church is pushing their "freedom in Christ." Eating meat that has been offered to idols is a threat to others. What to do? Listen to these words from 1 Corinthians 8:1-13...

Sermon

The practice of offering food as a sacrifice to idols was a common practice in Greek and Roman cities. These were food offerings (usually meat) symbolically presented in worship to the god in whose temple they were given. So the issue was about the significance of eating such food that had been offered to an idol.

The Scriptures affirm belief in one God, as seen in The Shema of ancient Israel:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Dt. 6:4-5)

In Psalm 115 we read:

Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
they make no sound in their throats. (vv. 4-7)

We know that the Greeks and the Romans worshipped many gods. They had a god for most everything. A god of war, a goddess of love, a god of travel, a god of justice. Furthermore, they believed that there were many evil spirits. And these evil spirits were thought to be constantly trying to invade human beings. And the easiest way for them to enter a person was to attach themselves to food before it was eaten. In order to remove such evil spirits the food was sacrificed to a god. Thus did the sacrifice not only gain the favor of the god, but it also cleansed the food of the evil spirit.

According to John MacArthur in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, such offerings were divided into three parts. One part was burned on the altar as the sacrifice proper. The second part was given to the priests who served in the temple. And the third part was kept by the person making the offering. Because there were so many offerings, the priests were not able to eat all of their portion and therefore what they did not need was sold in the marketplace. Such meat was highly sought after because it had been purified of evil spirits. This would be the meat served at feasts and banquets.

The problem for some Christians was that eating such food brought them into association with pagan gods and goddesses. It took them back to a time when they believed in such idols. They just instinctively felt it was wrong. If a relative was getting married, or a friend was having

a banquet, these Christians were put in the awkward position of not eating what was served or eating food that had been offered to idols, akin to idol worship itself.

However, for other Corinthians this matter was no problem at all. Their knowledge had led them to realize that these heathen gods did not really exist, and their food was not contaminated by evil spirits. And Paul shared the view of this group. As he said in verse 8, “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.” Did not Jesus say, “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” (Mk. 7:15) So they could eat such food with no qualms at all.

Paul’s concern is not that someone may see the Corinthian Christians eating meat offered to idols and then assume they are sinning. Paul’s concern is that fellow believers may join more liberated believers in eating food offered to idols, even though it goes against their conscience. He does not want the more scrupulous Corinthian Christians to be encouraged to act against their beliefs.

Here in 1 Corinthians 8 Paul tells the more sophisticated Christians that if something becomes a stumbling block to someone else, then you should avoid it. “Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.”

In his book *Daily Gems* Dwight L. Moody tells this story:

A blind man in a great city was found sitting at a street corner with a lantern beside him. Someone went up to him and asked him why he had the lantern, since he was blind and the light of it was the same to him as the darkness. The blind man simply replied, “So that no one may stumble over me.”

So one of the lessons to be gained here from Paul the apostle is that things have to be judged not simply from the point of view of knowledge, but more importantly from the vantage of love. As William Barclay says, there is always the danger that knowledge can make a person arrogant, puffed up. So that he feels superior to others who are not so enlightened. But genuine

knowledge would not do that. With genuine knowledge we find that the more we learn, the more we realize we have to learn. And such knowledge brings about a certain humility.

You know, there's a difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is about facts and ideas that we gain through study, research, or experience. While wisdom is the ability to discern and judge which aspects of knowledge are true, lasting, and appropriate to a certain matter.

The nineteenth century English preacher Charles Spurgeon said:

Wisdom is the right use of knowledge. To know is not to be wise. Many men know a great deal, and are all the greater fools for it. There is no fool so great a fool as a knowing fool. But to know how to use knowledge is to have wisdom.

And British journalist Miles Kington said:

Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit.
Wisdom is knowing not to put a tomato in a
fruit salad.

During a lifetime we can acquire a wealth of knowledge, and yet be impoverished when it comes to wisdom. And according to our psalm,

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.

This is not fear in the sense of a paralyzing terror, but fear in the sense of reverence. Fear in the sense of awe and wonder at the Lord's mighty works. Fear in the sense of honor and respect for God and his word. It was just such a fear and awe that created a path for Noah to build an ark to provide for the continuing life of God's good creation. It was just such a fear that led Isaiah to answer God's call, "Here am I; send me." (Isa. 6:6-8) It was just such a fear that enabled four fishermen to leave their nets and follow Jesus in "fishing for people."

There is of course no concern today among Christians about eating food offered to idols. But there are other matters about which there could be a problem. Drinking a glass of wine at dinner may be a commonplace, enjoyable experience for some. It may even have the blessing of their doctor. But for others it may be a stumbling block. Perhaps they grew up in a home where alcohol was not associated with anything good, but everything bad. And they have decided that they don't want to drink at all, lest they be drawn into a life of misery and suffering. A wise Christian couple having such guests at a meal would not serve wine, out of love for them.

Again, the issues that could present stumbling blocks might include working or playing ballgames on the Sabbath, divorce, or euthanasia. And how we address these matters should reflect not just knowledge, but more importantly—love. Knowledge can make us look good and feel important. But it can also reflect arrogance and pride, an unwillingness to listen to God or to others.

Knowledge without love, puffs up. The mark of real knowledge is not special privileges for a certain few, but a love for God and neighbor that is demonstrated in concern for one's fellow believers. Wise and knowing love builds up. This is the same love Paul speaks of later in chapter 13 of this Letter to the Corinthians:

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

...

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (vv. 2, 4-7)

To Jesus Christ, who loves us
and has freed us from our sins by his blood
and made us a kingdom,
priests of his God and Father,
to him be glory and dominion
for ever and ever. (Rev. 1:5-6) Amen.